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THE TYPICAL AMERICAN.

BY ANDREW LANG AND MAX O'RELL.

WE ARE asked to describe or define the typical American. It is like one of those difficult drawing-room games which are played with paper and pencils. Candor seems to be the order of the hour, and one may begin by saying that, if we judged Americans by this new sport or pastime, we might be tempted to think them a trifle self-conscious. The French, the Germans, the English, "the cannibal and the very Perusine," as an old author has it, do not trouble themselves about their type. We know what the French think our type is—not John Bull at all, but a long thin man in tweeds, with long pendent whiskers, and an air of respectable dilapidation. That is not quite accurate; and inaccurate, of course, is our traditional Jonathan, with a huge straw hat, with his chair tilted back, with the big knife that restlessly whittles, and the plug of tobacco which is incessantly chewed. Then we have innumerable "types" in modern novels—in Mr. James's, Mr. Howells's, in "Mr. Barnes of New York," in Mr. Edgar Fawcett's romances, and in those of Mr. Saltus. The types have not many things in common, and what foreigner is to decide where natives disagree?

I am not a good person to ask about typical Americans, for I have seen but few, and have never been in the States. Certainly I have met none who wear straw hats, chew tobacco, whittle, spit, tilt their chairs, or dispose their feet on the chimney-piece. And I have never been addressed as "stranger" nor as "Britisher," nor even shot at. Only once have I met an American who was full of strange oaths. It was in 1870, when I chanced twice to visit Lausanne in the course of a week. On the first occasion I stayed at Ouchy, where were many American ladies, dressed with a magnificence that rebuked the dowdy British fair, in her kind

of shirt and kind of skirt. If our women dress deplorably absurdly, as many of them do, perhaps their sisters of the States are now and then inappropriately magnificent. But this is a digression. At Ouchy I met a delightful American gentleman, who had seen the world and the face of war, and who might have been an Austrian, an Englishman, an Italian, or almost anything civilized except a Prussian. But at the Hotel Gibbon, in the same week, I met a party of young American men, who were the very most profane and noisy "tigers" (as Major Pendennis would have said) that one ever encountered. Yet there was something vivacious and exotic in their manner which was curious, if not engaging.

How is a foreigner to know who is the prevalent type—the man of Ouchy or the men of the Hotel Gibbon? And how can he possibly strike an average, or construct a type by posing them, as in a collective photograph? These were strangers; but it is hardly more possible to evolve a type out of one's American friends. One only meets them away from their homes, and a man taken out of his native environment is no longer the same person. He may be animated and curious and critical here, but the reverse of all that in his own country. I remember a young American lady, in France, who was forever talking about the difference between Americans and English. "The difference," some one answered, but very politely, "is that *you* are always thinking about the difference, while we don't trouble ourselves about it." Of course this lady is not a typical American woman; but are these other ladies typical (they are very agreeable) whom one would never guess to be Americans at all—who might be French, or English, or cosmopolitan?

Plainly a foreigner is very much at a loss to describe a typical American. If I were put by the editor to "that extreme and cruel torture of the boot," I could only fashion a type of a particular class of American; not a political, not an industrial, not a sporting, nor agricultural type. He would have to represent the literary, or diplomatic, or vaguely "leisured," or artistic, or publishing classes; and these, of course, are but small minorities of American humanity. Then, when the type was drawn and the picture finished, it would be like one of those sketches which lady novelists make by mixing up a brother of theirs, the curate of the parish, a tutor of Oriel, and the general feminine ideal of man.

It would resemble the portrait of Menodotis, translated by Dr. Garnett from the Greek Anthology:

“Menodotis's portrait here is kept,
How odd it is!
How very like to all the world except
Menodotis!”

But, if try we must, here goes for the typical American of the educated classes. He is not very like an Englishman; he is rather more like a Frenchman, but still more like an American. You cannot say where he differs in appearance from a Briton; it may be in his necktie, his boots, or the way in which he brushes his hair. He seldom looks as if he lived much in the open air or was fond of field sports. He is much more vivacious than an Englishman, more original in manner, more fertile in ideas, more modern in every way. He is almost too good company; too effervescent for some natives of a slow, foggy climate. He is enviably detached from our infernal politics and social confusions. These are all pretty indifferent to the native of a country which has elbow-room, a militia which shoots, and practically no neighbors. He is usually rather fond of the Irish and their cause, but he never goes to Ireland. He does not mind explaining to you the niceties of baseball; but I have known an elderly Frenchman take more interest than he does in cricket. He seems to me to know a great deal about cookery and delicacies of strange names, American or French; but he has, perhaps, no very high opinion of our poor culinary efforts.

He is not curious, however, in strange mixed juleps and cocktails, and so forth, like the representative American of the stage. He very seldom talks with an English accent, and even when he does, his idioms bewray him. He takes a Platonic interest in poker, but is no gambler. He is much too familiar with English life to be very keenly curious about it, and he never dreams of going to see the lions. He is rather fond of the play, knowing and caring very much more about our authors, actors, pieces, and so forth, than I do, for one. He is kind, courteous, ingenious, obliging, a good fellow, and welcome because he is infinitely more alive than most of us. To bring him into a room full of dejected Britons is like pouring fresh water among the fish in a pail. He is patriotic, but no *Chauviniste*, and is aware that Bunker Hill was but a British defeat. He does not talk about

the War and Mr. Abraham Lincoln. We are sorry when he goes away, and glad when he comes back again, with a new budget of good stories, for, if he has a national trait, it is the swopping of anecdotes. He is not a man that anybody would think of trying to impose on, but he is not demonstratively acute. Never have I seen a robustious American, nor an American who preached, nor an American who told pointless stories.

On the whole, this appears an amiable type ; but is this the typical American ? It is really impossible to say, when he is taken out of the *milieu* of his business, his home, his furniture, his books, his newspapers, his restaurants, and shops, and theatres, and streets. If any enterprising editor will kindly send me (at his proper expense) from one end of the States to the other, and will show me country and town, and the lakes and rivers, and the Indians, and negroes, and Irish, and Germans, and Jews, and Zufis, and if he will insure my life against interviewers, and mosquitoes, and "beasts serpentine," then, when I have found some inaccessible paradise of leisure in the southern seas, I will describe at full length, and with no reserve, the typical American. But it will only be the opinion of "a poor islander."

ANDREW LANG.

UNFORTUNATELY, the typical American, as I have said in a lecture, is just what I have always failed to discover in America. Is the reader quite sure that there exists such a being as the typical American ? A few days ago I was speaking on this very subject with two eminent Americans. Both seemed inclined to believe in his existence. One was of the opinion that the typical American was taciturn ; the other was of the opinion that he was talkative. How should I settle the case ?

Now, let us understand each other. The whole civilized world, as it has been remarked before, is composed of only two kinds of men,—men who are gentlemen, and men who are not,—and America is no exception to the rule. In feeling, in behavior, in culture, and in refinement of manners, there is no difference—none whatever—between an American gentleman and a gentleman from France, England, or any European country, including Germany. Good society is good society everywhere ; a gentleman is a gentleman everywhere. If, therefore, we wish to discover a typical American, it is not among the gentlemen of this country

that we may hope to find him. I imagine there was a typical American in New England a hundred years ago. This man still exists, but is only typical now *locally*, and is probably as different from a Westerner or a Southerner as I am different from an Englishman or a German—a German especially. Does the reader remember those specimens of composite photographs that appeared in *The Century* magazine some two years ago? The process seems to me exactly that through which the American is now going. As I have said in “*Jonathan and His Continent*,” there are plenty of Americans, but *the American* does not yet exist. He is being evolved, and I shall not attempt to say when he will be finally evolved, or what he will be when evolved.

If my opinion—my modest opinion—is that there is no typical American, I, however, believe that there are some traits which are to be found in almost every American. Need I add once more that I now leave aside American gentlemen, and that I look for these traits among the masses of the people, or, if you prefer it, among men who are not gentlemen?

Nations are like human beings: when they are young, they have the qualities and the defects of children. This childishness has given birth, in this country, to what I have no hesitation in calling the chief American trait—inquisitiveness.

Take American journalism. Does it not live by catering to this national trait? Let an artist, a singer, a painter, a writer, become popular in America: will not your papers immediately inform the public what he or she has for breakfast? When I made my first appearance on an American platform, the public were informed that I wore an irreproachable white necktie and patent-leather boots, and that the front of my shirt had only one button-hole. Personally, I should have imagined that such details must be very uninteresting, but I suppose they are not. Journalists are like other men of business: they supply the article that is wanted. I remember quite well how a paper in a little Pennsylvania town had a long article on the subject of a light-gray pair of trousers that I wore while walking about the town. There was not much on the subject of the lecture I had given the night before, but my “white pants,” it appeared, had attracted a great deal of public attention; and it was only my modesty—my well-known modesty—which prevented me from folding the above-mentioned “white pants,” packing them, and sending them, with my compliments,

to the editor of the paper in question, with the view of contributing to the starting of a local museum of curiosities.

I have been asked by American reporters whether I did my literary work in the morning, in the afternoon, or in the evening. I have been asked by others whether I used white or blue paper (*sic*). One said to me that he had been told that M. Jules Claretie, the novelist, who is now director of the Comédie Française, used large-size paper to write his novels on, and small-size paper for his journalistic work; and I really felt sorry to be unable to give him satisfaction.

Look, again, at the advertisements in the papers of this country. Why, you will see that a bootmaker, a hatter, or any other tradesman will publish his portrait by the side of the puffing advertisement of his goods. Will the publication of his portrait help this tradesman to sell his goods? Well, he must think so, or he would not go into the expense of having the block made.

The personalities that are indulged in by your press, the details of private life, some of them most trivial, that are made public every day—all this tends to show that inquisitiveness is an American trait, and, I personally believe, the chief American trait.

This inquisitiveness, which sometimes takes the form of preposterous questions, is the delight of Europeans; but they will prefer the charge against Americans of all classes, and that is where they make a great mistake. They will not, the English especially, distinguish between Americans that are gentlemen and those that are not. In their eyes, they all go in the same bag. And even that good-tempered, good-humored, inquisitive American they misjudge, I believe. They take this inquisitiveness to be an act of rudeness, whereas I think it is, rather, on his part, an act of good-fellowship.

Is not the following little American story, either true to fact or true to fiction, a proof of it?

An American is sitting in a railway car, opposite a woman in mourning, who looks the picture of misery.

“Lost father or mother?” queries the American, reducing his sentence to its simplest expression, according to the wont of his compatriots.

“No, sir.”

“Ah! son or daughter, I guess?”

"No, sir ; I have lost my husband !"

"Your husband ? Ah !—left you comfortable ?"

The woman, indignant, leaves her seat and goes away.

Remarks the good-hearted American to his neighbor :

"Rather a stuck-up person, this."

He was not a rude man ; he was a good fellow.

I remember having had one day the following bit of conversation with an American in the little smoking-compartment of a Pullman car.

Said my interlocutor :

"Foreigner, I guess ?"

"Foreigner," said I.

"Married ?"

"Married."

"Going to America on pleasure ?"

"Well, yes—a little business connected with it."

"What's your line ?"

"H'm—French goods."

"French goods ? What kind ?"

"The *article de Paris*."

"The what ?"

"The *ar-ti-cle de Pa-ris*."

"Oh ! the *aart'cle of Purriß*."

"Exactly.—Pray excuse my pronunciation."

The good fellow was floored, but all the same he was a good fellow, a man who wanted to show that he took an interest in me ; for, later on, after he had recovered, he poured information and advice into my listening ears.

I have said that inquisitiveness was the chief American trait, and that it arose from the childish character of a man who belongs to a great, successful, but young, nation. Are there not other traits, more or less typical of American manners, arising from the same cause ? I believe there are. Generosity, impulsiveness, forgiveness, and—excuse the word—cheek are among them. The American runs wildly after the dollar, but he is lavish of it : he does not love it ; he likes it for what it procures ; and avarice, which you so commonly find in England and in France, is a vice—an ugly vice—that you very seldom find in an American. He will resent an insult, but very quickly forgets it; and there is no man in the world that can stand good-humored

chaffing as well as he does. He is audacious, simply because he has done such marvellous things in such a short time that he simply believes nothing is impossible to him. His ideas are eccentric, but eccentricity is only an exaggerated form of the activity of mind. He lives on a continent so vast that he can hardly see a limit to it. He has the word "big" carved on the cranium, and is it a wonder that sometimes the word is so deeply carved that it makes a hole or a crack in it?

I repeat it, I have never discovered the typical American, although I have discovered traits that are characteristic of most Americans; and, as for American gentlemen, I have never been able to distinguish them from English or French gentlemen. The aristocracy of nature is universal.

Now, if there is no typical American man, I believe there is a typical American woman; but, as I have not been asked to contribute my mite on the subject, I will abstain from making any remarks upon her.

PAUL BLOUËT (Max O'Rell).